

Differentiated Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom

Elizabeth Abrams- Finarelli
Educ 659

Outline

- I. Intro
- II. What is Differentiation?
 - A. History
 - B. Definition
 - C. Elements and beliefs
- III. How I can incorporate it in my Spanish classes?
 - A. Getting Started
 - B. Preassessment: Readiness, Interests and Learning Styles
 - C. Content, Process, and Product
- IV. What are the benefits of a differentiated foreign language classroom?
- V. Conclusion
- VI. Bibliography

Differentiation was a term I hadn't heard of until I moved to Maryland two years ago. Since then I have focused much of my attention on understanding what it is and now my present professional development goal is to incorporate more differentiated strategies in my Spanish classes. I feel I have a good grasp on the terminology of differentiation, yet I still have difficulty implementing it. In this project, my goal is to capture a better understanding of differentiation, experiment with new strategies and recount steps I have made in order to develop a differentiated classroom.

First I feel it is necessary to give a little background of this very fundamental educational buzzword, differentiation. Although it has been a huge topic of most recent teaching strategies, it has actually been around for at least two decades. Some people feel that good teachers have been differentiating all along. Differentiation was originally intended for gifted and talented students (those working above grade level). Then after the Americans with Disabilities Act and IDEA were passed, educators shifted focus to special-education students as well students working below grade level and found that differentiation was a great teaching strategy to benefit all students. Now differentiation is viewed as a fundamental teaching tool in mixed-ability classrooms.

Differentiation is a term that encompasses many different strategies and attitudes that primarily focus on students and their learning. An informal definition given by Carol Ann Tomlinson in *How to Differentiate in Mixed Ability Classrooms* is "shaking things up a bit." The standards and curriculum tell us what students need to know, and differentiated-instruction techniques help us get them there while we teach them how to learn (Blaz, 2006). Since differentiation is a multifaceted, student centered approach there are many elements involved. Differentiation includes many complex and flexible ways of accommodating different learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs and comfort zones. It can be described as *rigorous*, by providing challenging instruction that motivates students, *relevant*, in that it focuses on essential learning without unnecessary extra or more of the same, and *proactive*, because it uses active learning methods like hands-on projects. There are certain beliefs and practices that most effective differentiated classrooms are based upon. *Student choice* in a differentiated classroom allows students to choose what they learn; how they learn it and how they show the knowledge they have (assessment). Many find that making *connections* between the new lesson and a student's previous experience, knowledge or interest is beneficial way of pegging

information to a student's long-term memory. This is why *connections* is one of the five C's in the national standards for foreign language. Another belief in differentiation is that teachers should take the time to *teach students how to learn*. When students are aware of how they learn best they can use those strategies to their benefit inside and outside the classroom.

Differentiation also includes many learning modes such as inquiry, memorization, technology and socialization meanwhile addressing a combination of Gardner's multiple intelligences. In addition, there are a wide variety of other techniques educators should consider. Instead of looking for convergent responses (one right answer), teachers should encourage open-ended questions in order to promote curiosity and creativity in the lesson. Not just differentiated classrooms but all classrooms should have structure and routines in order to ensure students' sense of security and set expectations. This is where theories such as cooperative discipline would help in constructing a positive relationship between the teacher and the students. A well-developed differentiated classroom in foreign language should be communicative and interactive and should encourage students to talk at appropriate times. Spencer Kagan's Cooperative Learning strategies emphasize the importance of using flexible groupings and varying roles during group learning, which are also very important components of differentiation. Lastly differentiation encourages teachers to develop variety in instruction as well as assessments. This is echoed in Robert Marzano's Dimensions of Learning, which emphasize that different products can be used to demonstrate learning. Varying instruction and assessment engages students' interests, breaks the monotony and encourages more feedback between the teacher and students.

When I first began to differentiate, I tried varying everything everyday and soon became burned out. My principal noticed I was making a valiant effort and offered these words of advice, "Don't try to differentiate everything all at once" and he handed me an article by Kari Sue Wehrmann entitled *Baby Steps: A Beginner's Guide to Differentiation*. The article advised those new to differentiation to take "baby steps" in approaching differentiation. Focus on one thing at a time and experiment new strategies. Feeling comforted that I wasn't as stupid as I felt; I made my next task to identify what are the focal points of my teaching that I should differentiate. This is when I familiarized myself with Joseph Renzulli's five Dimensions of Differentiation: **Content, Process, Product, Classroom** and **Teacher**. Differentiating the classroom is simply using flexible grouping and adapting the physical environment. As for the teacher, Renzulli suggests that the instructor be part of the learning exploration, through the use

of personal interests, collections, hobbies, opinions, beliefs, or enthusiasms about related issues. Tomlinson adds that teachers should see themselves as organizers of learning opportunities. She also feels they should grow in their ability to 1) assess students' readiness through a variety of means, 2) "read" and interpret student clues about interests and learning preference, 3) create a variety of ways students can gather information and ideas, 4) develop varied ways students can explore and own ideas, and 5) present varied channels through which students can express and expand understandings. As for *Content*, *Process*, and *Product*, the three basic terms of differentiation that Tomlinson promotes, they will be addressed in detail in later sections. First I want to address "getting started".

The first step I found out was preassessing my students. My first thought was "Oh great, more work!" Then I realized the importance preassessing had on the rest of my planning. Content, Process and Product are what can be differentiated, but preassessing *readiness*, *interests*, and *learning styles* determine why we differentiate. The importance of preassessing readiness is supported with brain research showing that students do not learn effectively when tasks are too simple or too complex. In an effort to try preassessing readiness in my own classroom, I have tried to develop an informal preassessment of the students' prior knowledge for each lesson. Based on their readiness I could then divide the class into appropriate mixed-ability groups that has each student with an assigned role. In other lessons, I have developed tiered lessons or sets of activities that address certain standards, key concepts, and generalizations but allows for several pathways for students to arrive at an understanding of these components. Tiered assignments focus on the same essential skills and understanding for all students, but at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness (Blaz, 2006).

As part of my research for this project I decided to inventory all of my Spanish 1 eighth grade students' interests. I used an interest inventory from *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners, Grades 3-12* by Diane Heacox, Ed.D. After my students finished their first quarterly exams, I distributed the inventories and had the students take as much time as they needed to fill them out. I did have a handful of students ask why they were doing something like this and I explained that it was for me to get to know them better. I found that this research confirmed some of what I already knew about my students, especially the ones that I had in my seventh grade Intro Spanish courses last year. However, I was not prepared for the overwhelming feedback that enlightened me to how my

students felt. I realized that majority of my students are interested in and enjoy Spanish class even though they find it challenging. A greater part of the eighth grade prefers to work and learn with another person or in a small group, which validates my thoughts about collaborative/cooperative learning activities being the most beneficial to my students. The most popular interests were sports, music and art. The least favorite activity was writing. What I found the most remarkable was the students' descriptions of what they thought a great teacher is. Almost everybody described a great teacher as having a good sense of humor, using fun activities to teach with and explaining things multiple times and in multiple ways until they understood it. Reading how my students' felt about their learning really gave me insight that I lacked previously. From this feedback, I can now better differentiate future activities and most importantly this data helps me to forge better relationships with my students.

Since Spanish falls somewhere between core subjects and encore classes, it is hard to develop a full learning profile when you meet with your students either every other day or every third day. Instead of conducting a formal learning profile, I have used the data given to me such as MSA scores, collaboration between myself and other teachers and most importantly my own classroom observations to determine vague learning profiles of my students. I am aware that most of my students are visual learners and learn best when they can represent material in graphic organizers and pictures. A majority of my students are interpersonal learners who are good at motivating others, organizing and communicating. They enjoy working in groups. They also are bodily/kinesthetic learners who like to complete hands-on activities and act out material. Lastly as foreign language learners, they are naturally very verbal and linguistic, if they would admit it or not. The foreign language curriculum and standards encourages students to be communicative by listening, speaking, reading, telling, discussing, and writing.

Now I am going to take a look at the three major curricular elements (Content, Process and Product) that teachers differentiate in response to student needs. Content, the "what to teach", refers to the "input" of the unit: ideas, concepts, information and facts. Focusing on the unit's most essential components and varying them to meet learners' needs by providing them choices is basically differentiating content. One way to differentiate content is by modifying the variety of texts: simple or more advanced, authentic documents, total physical response (TPR), audio and video tapes, field trips, etc...Another way to differentiate content is to give students a

choice in the type of instruction: direct instruction, learning centers, online work, worksheet, small-group instruction, etc...

Process, the “how to teach”, refers to the ways students make their own sense of the content or input. One way a teacher could differentiate process is by applying a variety of flexible grouping strategies such as ability grouping, interest grouping or grouping by learning profile. Some activities may be whole class, paired or individual as well. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory can be used in designing instruction by attending to learners’ different intelligence profiles. For example, in designing a unit on sports activities, a teacher could find three different texts about three different sports. In differentiating according to the multiple intelligence theory, one group might practice demonstrating a sport from the target culture as a kinesthetic option, whereas another group could design a poster with equipment needed as a visual spatial option. Yet another group could develop a presentation or report on a sport, which accommodates verbal-linguistic intelligences. Another way to differentiate process is by modifying the complexity or abstractness of tasks by engaging students in critical and creative thinking (Heacox, 2006). A great way of doing this is by offering students choice boards, menus or optional activities lists which provide options for learners to practice skills, try new products and work with a variety of resources as they learn.

Finally, a product, the “how to assess”, is the output of the unit or the ways that students demonstrate or exhibit their understanding of the content. According to Heacox, both Bloom’s Taxonomy and Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences can be applied to the differentiation of products by providing greater challenge, variety and choice in how students demonstrate or represent what they have learned. There are endless possibilities for varying products. Some include role-plays, web quests, reader’s theater, graphic organizers such as KWLs and Venn diagrams, R.A.F.T. (role, audience, format, topic) activities, mobiles, choreographed dances, etc...Every book cited in the bibliography offers a comprehensive list of differentiated products. In addition to varied products, there are also varied ways of grading the products. Performance oriented assessments, compacting, portfolios, rubrics and checklists are just a few ways a teacher can score differentiated assessments.

My original thoughts lead me to believe that when I was finished with this project I would be able to clearly see all of the benefits of a differentiated classroom. However, upon concluding my research I find myself with too many benefits to count. So I will try to highlight

a few of the ones that have made personal affects on my teaching and classroom in particular. Through preassessment I have gotten to know my students better. I understand what they like and what is important to them, which has facilitated in building a more positive relationship with my students. I notice that a differentiated classroom makes students feel more comfortable in the learning environment and promotes them to be creative in their communication. I recognize that everything that I feel is important to lesson doesn't have to be taught. Instead I should identify the essentials and differentiate what needs to be learned, what is extra and what is non-essential. I also realized that best way to engage students is by providing choices that allow them to choose how to learn and how to express their understanding. This usually corresponds with their interests and learning styles meanwhile teaching them what strategies work best for them. I do feel differentiation allows students to perform to their potential as well as take accountability for their learning.

As for my professional growth, I feel by understanding differentiation and experimenting with it my classroom I have become more sensitive to my students needs. It may require more time and effort on my behalf when it comes to planning, but the rewards are worth it. I want my students to remember me as a great teacher with a good sense of humor and having a way of explaining things so they understand.

My concluding thought is that when it comes to teaching there is no "one size fits all". Like many other aspects of being human, we are all different and that includes being different types of learners. Students come to a classroom with different backgrounds, a range of abilities, varied learning profiles and a diversity of needs. In order to appropriately respond to these needs, teachers should differentiate their instruction. By differentiating, teachers will have more genuine interactions with their students and students will be able to experience opportunities that will help them reach their potential.

Bibliography

Articles

Wehrmann, Sue. (2000). *Baby Steps: A Beginner's Guide to Differentiation* [Electronic version]. *Educational Leadership Magazine*, September.58 (1), 20-23. from <http://www.ascd.org>

Books

Armstrong, Thomas. (2000). *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Blaz, Deborah. (1999). *Foreign Language Teacher's Guide to Active Learning*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Blaz, Deborah. (2006). *Differentiated Instruction: A Guide for Foreign Language Teachers*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Heacox, Diane. (2002). *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners, Grades 3-12*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Co.

Tomlinson, Carol. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Tomlinson, Carol. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Websites

Education World (database online). [cited 25 November 2006] Available: http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr054.shtml
(Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences)